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Nedelkopoulou, E. (2017) Attention please! Changing modes of engagement in device-enabled one-to-one performance encounters.
Contemporary Theatre Review, 27(3), pp. 353-365.

This is an accepted version of an article published by Taylor & Francis Group in *Contemporary Theatre Review* on 03/11/2017, available online:
<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10486801.2017.1343245>

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Attention Please! Changing Modes of Engagement in Device-enabled One-to-one Performance Encounters

The aim of this article is to explore attention structures that invite one-to-one encounters in digitally-informed practice. If attention is an inherent part of the theatrical contract, and digital browsing invites multitasking, then what sort of engagements do digitally informed performances invite? This essay focuses on Blast Theory's *Karen* (2015) and Dries Verhoeven's *Wanna Play? (Love in the Time of Grindr)* (2014, 2015). In both of these performances attention is called and given in different ways that potentially open up novel forms of performance encounters. Blast Theory's *Karen* is a product of our distributed networked reality where focused and undivided attention is hardly sustainable. *Wanna Play? (Love in the Time of Grindr)* invites participation in face-to-face physical encounters in a public space, in Verhoeven's attempt to challenge the pattern of 'hidden' sexual interactions induced by online dating apps. Attention does not appear to be a theme *per se* of either of these artworks as presented by their creators; and yet, it appears as a performed or requested 'tactic'. Attention is scarce, and is paid here to attention that helps define the economy of our networked culture as well as of the specific performance practices in question.

Karen and *Wanna Play?* belong to a body of practice including works by Blast Theory, Coney, Invisible Flock, Rimini Protokoll, David Rosenberg, and others, that increasingly use locative, mobile and ubiquitous technologies. The application of various types of individual, one-to-one and personal interactions within these practices suggests modes of engagement promoted through the digital (*Karen*) or

negotiating the digital (*Wanna Play?*). Different attention registers are called and given in light of an attention economy geared around promise, anticipation, and a reward. Whilst surrounded by societal and economic structures, which directly aim at a pay-off and a reward out of each experience, there is a question about the strategies of specific performances and the ways in which they call their audience members' attention, when audiences are *drowned* into their information or fear the exposure of information pertaining to them individually.

In both *Karen* and *Wanna Play?* everything starts with a mobile phone – two applications uploaded; the first one, a life coaching application based on 'psychological profiling and personalisation' (Blast Theory), the second a 'geosocial networking application' (Grindr) in quest of a date and a sexual partner. The one-to-one interactions that happen through smart hand-held devices can accommodate parallel and multiple interactions and functions. For Robert Payne, 'Smartphones and tablets are promiscuous media not just for their radical, customised multimodality. More than this, their multimodality presumes divided attention as the preferred mode of engagement'.¹ Hence, one-to-one encounters can easily multiply, by way of parallel interactions with more than one user or the parallel actions of multiple applications. In this context one-to-one encounters become more crowded and invite both our divided and our uncommitted attention. This digital and networked *promiscuity*, as a multimodal logic of communication and engagement, challenges the resource of attention.

In their confessional accounts of respective one-to-one encounters Deidre Heddon, Helen Iball and Rachel Zerihan identify a 'formal shift in the traditional

¹ Robert Payne, *The Promiscuity of Network Culture: Queer Theory and Digital Media* (New York; Oxon: Routledge, 2016), p. 5.

performer/spectator divide', and observe that '[t]he concurrent popularity of both the One to One form and of digital "first person" platforms for seemingly intimate displays is surely not coincidental'.² Rather, 'both media suggest the possibility of connection and personal encounter via their forms. (...) Both forms share a potentially paradoxical promise of sociality through performances of self'.³ The discussion of *Karen* and *Wanna Play?* that follows departs from the often-made assumption that one-to-one performance results in intimate encounters, to focus on the attentional frameworks that define these encounters.⁴ Whether or not (these) one-to-one exchanges are intimate is uncertain. What is certain, however, is that one-to-one performances target and compete for their participants' attention. The function of digital and social media in *Karen* and *Wanna Play?* raises questions regarding the nature of the attention structures that the artists create to allocate and capture their audiences' engagement.

Attention! Attention!

In the 1990s and early-twenty-first century a number of scholars including Jonathan Beller, Thomas Davenport and John Beck, Georg Franck, and Michael Goldhaber

² Deirdre Heddon, Helen Iball, and Rachel Zerihan, 'Come Closer: Confession of Intimate Spectators', *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 22:1 (2012), 120-33 (p. 120, 121). The authors discuss their encounters with Adrian Howells' *Garden of Adrian*, Sam Rose's *Bed of Roses* and Martina Von Holn's *Seal of Confession*.

³ Ibid, p. 121.

⁴ Intimacy in one-to-one-performances has been discussed amongst others in: Rachel Zerihan, *One to One Performance: A Study Room Guide* (London: Live Art Development Agency, 2009) <http://www.thisisliveart.co.uk/resources/Study_Room/guides/Rachel_Zerihan.html> [accessed 28 August 2016], Maria Chatzichristodoulou and Rachel Zerihan, 'Introduction' and 'A Discussion on the Subject of Intimacy in Performance and an Afterword' in *Intimacy Across Visceral and Digital Performance*, ed. by Maria Chatzichristodoulou and Rachel Zerihan (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), pp. 1-11, pp. 213-234, Helen Iball, 'Towards an Ethics of Intimate Audience', *Performing Ethos*, 3:1 (2012), 41-57, Eirini Kartsaki, Rachel Zerihan and Brian Lobel, 'Editorial: Generous Gestures and Frustrated Acts: Ethics in One-to-one Performance', *Performing Ethos*, 3: 2 (2012) pp. 99-105.

developed the concept of the ‘attention economy’ as a feature of contemporary culture responding to the information overload that followed the ubiquitous and mainstream adoption of digital and pervasive media in business, culture and education.⁵ These accounts propose a new economy, which is based neither on material goods nor on information. Rather they emphasise the prevalence of attention as a phenomenon, and moreover its increasing importance to modes of exchange. As Goldhaber suggests, ‘No one would put anything on the Internet without the hope of obtaining some ... attention. And the economy of attention – not information – is the natural economy of cyberspace’ (1997).⁶ Patrick Crogan and Samuel Kinsley, reflecting on different accounts concerning the attention economy in their editorial ‘Paying Attention’ in *Culture Machine*, observe that ‘Attention is implicitly figured ... as a largely rational, and entirely conscious, capacity ... An attention economy is therefore not considered problematic because the strong causal link implied, the rational choice of the economic subject, maintains a semblance of freedom’.⁷

The overwhelming abundance of information and its adverse effect upon attention is not a new phenomenon; rather it has been a topic of discussion since the 1960s, as expressed by Marshall McLuhan and evidenced in the work of Herbert A.

⁵ Jonathan Beller, ‘Cinema, Capital of the 20th Century’, *Postmodern Culture*, 4.3 (1994) <<http://pmc.iath.virginia.edu/text-only/issue.594/beller.594>> [accessed 1 March 2016], Thomas Davenport and John Beck, *The Attention Economy: Understanding the New Currency of Business*, Cambridge (MA: Harvard Business Press, 2001), Georg Franck, ‘The Economy of Attention’, *Telepolis* (1999) <<http://www.heise.de/tp/artikel/5/5567/1.html>> [1 March 2016], Michael Goldhaber, ‘The Attention Economy and the Net’, *First Monday* 2.4 (1997) <http://firstmonday.org/article/view/519/440> [accessed 2 March 2016].

⁶ Michael H. Goldhaber, ‘Attention Shoppers’, *Wired*, 12 January 1997 <<https://www.wired.com/1997/12/es-attention/>> [accessed 1 September 2016].

⁷ Patrick Crogan and Samuel Kinsley, ‘Paying Attention: Towards a Critique of the Attention Economy’, *Culture Machine*, vol. 13 (2012), 1-29 (pp. 6-7), <<http://www.culturemachine.net/>> [accessed 2 February 2016]. Crogan and Kinsley continue by stating that ‘once that causality is problematised a range of issues opens up concerning the commodification of cognition as such’ (ibid. p. 7).

Simon.⁸ Geert Lovink sees this as a trajectory across the development of media and digital affordances: ‘the causes of attention breakdown shifted from the proliferation of channels and titles to storage capacity, but the symptoms remained the same: not coping any more and leaving incoming data flows to pile up until the system breaks down’.⁹ Simon recognises that human attention becomes a ‘scarce resource’ in the information-intensive environments of developed countries and discusses an economic approach to attention management. He explains:

In an information-rich world, the wealth of information means a dearth of something else: a scarcity of whatever it is that information consumes ... [I]t consumes the attention of its recipients. Hence, a wealth of information creates a poverty of attention and a need to allocate that attention efficiently among the overabundance of information sources that might consume it.¹⁰

Interestingly Jonathan Crary in his seminal book *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle and Modern Culture* presents attention as an ‘historical problem’ and he provides ‘a genealogy of attention since the end of nineteenth century’ which marks the upheaval of ‘capitalist modernity’.¹¹ For Crary the centrality of this

⁸ ‘One of the effects of living with electric information is that we live habitually in a state of information overload. There's always more than you can cope with’ Marshall McLuhan said on *The Best of Ideas* on CBC Radio in 1967. [In George Gilder, *Knowledge and Power: The Information Theory of Capitalism and How it is Revolutionising our World* (Washington: Regnery Publishing, 2013), p. 299].

⁹ Geert Lovink, *Networks Without a Cause: A Critique of Social Media* (Cambridge, Malden: Polity Press, 2011), p. 24.

¹⁰ Herbert A. Simon, ‘Designing Organizations for an Information-Rich World’, in *Computers, Communication, and the Public Interest*, ed. by Martin Greenberger (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins Press, 1971), p. 40.

¹¹ Jonathan Crary, *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle and Modern Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), p. 14, p. 2.

‘problem’ is ‘directly related to the emergence of a social, urban, psychic, and industrial field increasingly saturated with sensory input’.¹² The author highlights that ‘For the last 100 years perceptual modalities have been and continue to be in a state of perpetual transformation, or, some might claim, a state of crisis’.¹³ Crary specifies this ‘state of crisis’ as ‘crisis of attentiveness’, according to which ‘the changing configurations of capitalism continually push attention and distraction to new limits and thresholds’.¹⁴ Through his historical framework Crary’s discussion provides an understanding of the contemporary crisis of attention amid the increasing transformation of our networked culture.

The relationship between art, performance and the economics of attention is explored by Richard A. Lanham in his monograph *The Economics of Attention: Style and Substance in the Age of Information*. Lanham suggests that artists and humanists are in effect the new economists, experimenting with how attention can and should work effectively, and providing structures that capture and manage it. He asks for an urgent reconsideration of style over substance, of ‘fluff’ over ‘stuff’:

The devices that regulate attention are stylistic devices. Attracting attention is what style is all about ... If attention is now at the centre of the economy rather than stuff, then so is style ... In an economy of stuff, the laws of property govern who owns stuff. In an attention economy, it is the laws of intellectual property that govern who gets attention.¹⁵

¹² Ibid. p. 13.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid. p. 14.

¹⁵ Richard A. Lanham, *The Economics of Attention: Style and Substance in the Age of Information* (Chicago, London: The University of Chicago Press, 2006), pp. xi-xii.

According to Lanham, artists can be the new economists of different types of transactions in business and culture, when they engineer and practise ways in which attention could be allocated. Drawing examples from the Dadaists to John Cage to computer animators, Lanham calls for an oscillation from fluff to stuff, a shifting of attention back and forth in the ways that audiences, users and students oscillate between style and substance in their digital transactions. Style and substance are not binary opposites -- digital technologies invite their audiences to pay attention to processes and interfaces (fluff) as much as concrete ideas and material entities (stuff).

Some of the scholarship on, or responding to, the attention economy, emphasises changes in the way we give attention or have it demanded of us in digital culture. In a short essay published in 2007, addressing specifically the impact of ubiquitous networked and computational media on human communication and thinking, N. Katherine Hayles identifies a 'generational shift in cognitive styles' that challenges established educational and pedagogical strategies.¹⁶ Hence, she recommends, 'we need to become aware of its causes, and think creatively and innovatively' about new models of teaching and learning.¹⁷ For Hayles this shift 'in cognitive styles can be seen in the contrast between deep attention and hyper attention'.¹⁸ In particular, deep attention 'is characterised by concentrating on a single object for long periods ... , ignoring outside stimuli while so engaged, preferring a single information stream'. Hyper attention 'is characterized by switching focus rapidly among different tasks, preferring multiple information streams, seeking a high level stimulation'.¹⁹ Although Hayles's discussion concerns a pedagogical

¹⁶ N. Katherine Hayles, 'Hyper and Deep Attention: The Generational Divide in Cognitive Modes,' *Profession*, 13 (2007), 187-199 (p. 187).

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

framework, her re-examination of cognitive styles is relevant in considering how our everyday interactions, experiences and ways of thinking are shaped by and perhaps retrained in information-rich environments. ‘Whether inclined toward deep or hyper attention, toward one side or another of the generational divide separating print from digital culture’ she argues, ‘we cannot afford to ignore the frustrating, zesty, and intriguing ways in which the two cognitive modes interact’.²⁰ Hayles cautions against ‘assumptions about [deep attention’s] inherent superiority’,²¹ instead encouraging practitioners of the literary arts to consider the ‘constructive synthesis’ between different cognitive styles and invest in perspectives that bring ‘into view common ground between hyper and deep attention’.²²

The same might be said for practitioners of the performing arts. If this describes a contemporary scene for the notion of attention, it has always been a phenomenon in theatre and performance. In the opening of his recent monograph *Theatre and Aural Attention: Stretching Ourselves*, George Home-Cook claims that

Theatre has always been an “event” that we attend ... “Attending theatre” implies far more than the simple fact of being physically present at a given performance event. There is, for instance, a collective, as well as an individual, sense of commitment, discipline and responsibility engendered by the act of attending theatre ... Audiences acknowledge the account for their attendance by adhering (or not, as the case may be) to certain protocols ... and

²⁰ Ibid. p. 198.

²¹ Ibid. p. 188.

²² Ibid. p. 197. See also Bernard Stiegler’s bleak account of information-intensive environments in *Taking Care of Youth and the Generations* [Bernard Stiegler, *Taking Care of Youth and the Generations*, trans. by S. Barker (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010)].

most of all, by engaging in particular acts of attention.²³

Home-Cook addresses the qualities of theatre as a medium irrespective of its historical moment. The situation becomes more complicated when we consider theatre's inherent requirement of attention in relation to the new dynamics of the attention economy. As Bernard Stiegler suggests, 'Attention is not a passive or automatic perceptual process, but one that is trained, learnt, and culturally and historically – and therefore, technically – conditioned'.²⁴ To negotiate changes or shifts in protocols of attendance in the context of theatre and performance in a digitally-informed environment, it is helpful to consider human experience in relation to the function and use of networks (here meant in terms of digitally-enabled connectivity). For Lovink, networks as social-technical formations that can 'rapidly assemble' and 'just as quickly disappear'²⁵ create an atmosphere of uncertainty and tension followed by information overload, which remains difficult to manage or focus on. Networks accommodate idiosyncratic encounters. 'Working with others in distributed online networks frequently brings about tensions that have no recourse to traditional protocols of conflict resolution,' Lovink explains.²⁶

Theatre and performance events usually invite different modes of attention, rather than solely the 'luxury' of deep attention that print media require.²⁷ The use of mobile and computational devices in performance inherently contributes to an interplay between distributed and more focused attention – and this obtains in relation

²³ George Home-Cook, *Theatre and Aural Attention: Stretching Ourselves* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p. 1.

²⁴ In Crogan and Kinsley, 'Paying Attention', p. 17.

²⁵ Lovink, *Networked Without a Cause*, p. 74.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Hayles, 'Hyper and Deep Attention', p. 188.

to theatre's longer history of always requiring attention in a particular way.²⁸ Although the theatrical protocols change, audience members 'are necessarily required to make an effort, to do something, to *stretch*' themselves and performance events 'need attendants to engage in multiple acts of perception and alteration. Which is to say, performers need attention'.²⁹ For Home-Cook "“Stretching” also implies a sense of elasticity, variation and spontaneity, and play: attention is enactive'.³⁰ Surely attention is *stretched* in information-intensive environments, where 'attentive watching and listening give way to diffused multitasking'.³¹ At times the performance set-up embraces the necessity of oscillation between modes of attention, and at others it arguably critiques the loss of more focused ways of attending given the more generalised level of alertness fostered by personal computing devices.

Situated in a networked milieu, productions such as *Karen* and *Wanna Play?* invite participants to be in attendance in scenarios that oscillate between *stuff* and *fluff* in and through the digital. These performances do not offer the 'secure environment' that Hayles suggests is often related to deep and undivided attention.³² Rather, both productions exist in an information-intensive environment of 'multiple foci' that compete for the audience's attention – and make this plurality a feature of the participant's encounter with the work. Their protocols of engagement reconsider, repurpose, and perhaps remediate attention through one-to-one encounters.

Karen

²⁸ I prefer to use the generic *focused* attention instead of deep attention in the context of this essay - as deep attention seems to require individual's uninterrupted commitment for *a long period of time* that relates primarily to reading and print media.

²⁹ Home-Cook, *Theatre and Aural Attention*, p. 1, original emphasis) and Jon Foley Shermas, *A Strange Proximity: Stage Presence, Failure, and the Ethics of Attention* (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), p. 11.

³⁰ Home-Cook, p. 3.

³¹ Lovink, p. 136.

³² Hayles, 'Hyper and Deep Attention', p. 188.

Often blurring the boundaries between fiction and reality, Blast Theory has a long tradition of using mobile devices and pervasive gaming to reach out to audiences ‘across the internet, live performance and digital broadcasting’.³³ The company’s co-directors Matt Adams, Ju Row Farr and Nick Tandavanitj experiment with new forms of interactive performance and art to explore ‘the social and political aspects of technology’.³⁴ *Karen* could be considered a predecessor of the company’s interactive SMS drama *Ivy4EVR* (2010), and belongs to a long tradition of Blast Theory one-to-one performances through the use of mobile devices. In *Karen* the individual participants are not in contact with an online or physical community of participants, as they were in *Can You See Me Now?* (2001), *I Like Frank* (2004), *Rider Spoke* (2007), *I’d Hide You* (2012), *My Neck of the Woods* (2013), and *Too Much Information* (2015).³⁵

Matt Adams identifies *Karen* as ‘a personal and intimate experience for smartphones ... where you directly interact with the character’.³⁶ Inspired by corporate companies’ ability to accumulate an inconceivably large volume of data and instrumentalise different users’ data’,³⁷ Blast Theory creates a personal story based on the participants’ personalisation and psychological profiling.³⁸ *Karen* is the name of

³³ Blast Theory <<http://www.blasttheory.co.uk/our-history-approach/>> [accessed 27 September 2016].

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Maria Chatzichristodoulou offers an extensive overview of Blast Theory’s work in Liz Tomlin’s edited volume *British Theatre Companies: 1995-2014* [Maria Chatzichristodoulou, ‘Blast Theory’ in *British Theatre Companies: 1995-2014*, ed. by Liz Tomlin (London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama), pp. 231-254].

³⁶ <<http://www.blasttheory.co.uk/projects/karen/>> [accessed 1 September 2016]. The application is available for free on iTunes and Google Play.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ On the following video Matt Adams explains how the company used profiling and personalisation techniques to develop *Karen* <<http://www.blasttheory.co.uk/matt-adams-on-psychological-profiling-in-karen/>> [accessed 2 September 2016]. For more information about Blast Theory’s research on profiling and personalisation see <http://www.blasttheory.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/Act-Otherwise_Invisible-Hand-Report.pdf> [accessed 30 July 2016].

the main character of the performance, a friendly life coach who promises to provide support to her clients. *Karen* resonates the structure and the style of one-to-one performances, yet the encounter between the life coach and each individual participant is asynchronous and not anchored to a specific place. That is, Karen's 'sessions' with audience members happen in the now of the latter's experience through their handheld device.

My *interactions* with Karen entail different prerecorded videos, which offer me the option to communicate with her via written texts. Some of Karen's questions are taken and adjusted from depression self-assessment matrices used by professional counselors and psychotherapists. For instance, a message appears on my screen: 'I try to think good thoughts no matter how badly I feel'; and my response needs to be positioned in a continuum between totally disagree and totally agree. And yet Karen's professional questions or advice about optimism and living, a controlled and balanced life are often interrupted by her confessions and casual tone. Her questions and narrative fluctuate from professional to more generic to too personal. 'I am knackered. How are you?' she will ask me and I am offered usually three possible answers to choose from, for instance, 'Me too' or 'I'm quite excited actually' or 'This feels weird'. 'I believe in taking my pleasures where I find them, do you know what I mean?', she asks, to call me 'killjoy' if I dare to disagree with her. My responses to these questions set the tone for our discussions and eventually feed into the building of my final report at the end.

[INSERT IMAGE 1 HERE]

Image 1 *Karen* (Courtesy of Blast Theory)

Participants' access is intermittent, and dispersed during the course of a day. Karen will send updates, and will appear on planned sessions, which last between two and five minutes in duration. Sometimes she is late or misses our sessions altogether. 'Crap, running late, quick chat?' a text by Karen appears on my phone screen. She will demand my attention and will be irritated if I don't pick up ('What in hell are u doing? Ignoring me??'). Karen will call me 'treasure' – encouraging me to give her a call when I am at work, sleeping or out. Karen will randomly and erratically call and message her clients competing for their attention. She demands that attention is paid to her.

Blast Theory personalises participants' discussions with Karen to keep them hooked. I wonder when I told her my husband's name when I receive Karen's question, 'How would you feel if Harris searched your stuff when you were out?.' The actress Claire Cage as Karen will never read my messages or get to know me. Her prerecorded responses and routines are pre-directed, based to a certain extent on my own responses and behavior. And yet interestingly I will still think of *Karen* as *her*, and look forward to the next episode, or be momentarily surprised when she calls me, or challenged when she tells me off. I am not the only one; while checking the app's reviews I find a variety of responses by participants who talk about *her*, and the emotional attachment to *her*, often defining their interactions with Karen as intimate, fascinating, and even dysfunctional and abusive.³⁹

The app tailors my information and uses it in ways that make me desire to return to my sessions with Karen. Blast Theory acknowledges that an information-

³⁹ Users' reviews can be accessed via iTunes (<<https://itunes.apple.com/gb/app/karen-by-blast-theory/id945629374?mt=8>>), Blast Theory's website (<<http://www.blasttheory.co.uk/projects/karen/>>), and Google Play (https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.blasttheory.talktome&hl=en_GB) [accessed 1 September 2016].

rich environment attracts hyper-attention, and the company attempts to keep its audience's attention by seemingly offering private choices to individual participants. The design of *Karen* is adjusted to an attention economy through its mobile and intermittent format, which attempts to resist attention deficit through immediate access, personalised material, and a personal report offered as a reward at the end of the sessions. This concluding report encapsulates dimensions of the participant's personality – for instance their openness, propensity to neurosis, levels of control over their life, what appear to be the important things in their life, the role of materiality, their respect for people's privacy. The results are pretty much as accurate as Facebook and Google suggestions could be, extending on a continuum between appropriate personalised suggestions and engineered misinterpretations. However, in the case of *Karen* participants can buy (for £ 2.99) their own data and delete the information if they wish to. Adams explains: 'All the data you create in your app is yours and you can withdraw it at any time.'⁴⁰

Blast Theory deliberately misuses the life-coaching format to expose the mechanism of corporate data-mining of personal and collective information. The company adopts structures of the attention economy that will attract participants' engagement, but not to consume and capitalise their data like Facebook and Google would do. Rather, Blast Theory appropriates forms of personalisation, immediacy and accessibility and delivers a 'durational' app-based performance that lasts between one to two weeks and is easily accessed any time and any place through participants' mobile phones. The more time participants play this free performance game the more aware they become of the mechanisms of the experience of online and social media

⁴⁰ In Sophie Weiner, 'Can this Dysfunctional Life Coach Make you Care about Privacy Rights?', *Fastcodesign*, 14 April 2015 <<https://www.fastcodesign.com/3044818/can-this-dysfunctional-life-coach-make-you-care-about-privacy-rights>> [accessed 30 August 2016].

platforms. In her response to the performance Erin B. Mee writes:

Karen/Karen shows me how I respond to, react to, and behave in certain circumstances; my choices are then at the center of the play — and are analysed and given back to me in the data report. I am not the audience for *Karen's* escapades; *Karen* is the audience for my self-investigation. Or, arguably, the app itself, as it gathers data about me, is the audience — or spy.⁴¹

Through scattered personalised encounters *Karen* leads participants to pay attention to their attention and pay attention to their interface. The moments that the participants' attention becomes more focused on *Karen's* story, technology becomes invisible and attention turns to attention. Blast Theory reveals to its participants through durational playing how their choices and selections inform the narrative and eventually their personal report at the end.⁴²

Adopting the interactive pursuits of video and computer games through competition, reward and relatedness, the performance attempts to make its participants aware of how personal information could be captured and (mis)used in data mining digital platforms. Hence, attention-to-attention here does not coincide with Bernard Stiegler's urgent request for a reinvigoration and return to deep attention. Rather, *Karen* seems to implement strategies to tame its users' attention or its lack thereof through an interplay between hyper and more focused attentional registers. *Karen's* interface indeed oscillates between stuff and fluff, where content

⁴¹ Erin B. Mee, 'The Audience is the Message: Blast Theory's App-Drama *Karen*,' *TDR: The Drama Review*, 60.3 (Fall 2016), 165-171 (pp. 170-1).

⁴² Mee suggests that participants' answers to '*Karen's* questions determine the tone of the piece, but do not change the events that occur' (ibid, p. 170).

meets style. The particular design of the interface, as Lanham would argue, invites the participants ‘to attend to it in a particular way, to pay a certain type of attention to it’.⁴³ It is *Karen*’s interface that guides her participants to attend to their attention by revealing to them ‘not about the stuff per se but what [they] think about stuff’.⁴⁴ And indeed audiences attend to the ways they ‘respond to, react to, and behave in certain circumstances’ and that happens through a ‘constructive synthesis’ of different modes of attention.⁴⁵ This synthesis allows *Karen* to compete for its potential audience’s attention within a promiscuous medial milieu and then reverse the focal attention on the audience’s choices, which are at the centre of the play.

Wanna Play? (Love in the time of Grindr)

Differently from the ubiquitous prerecorded encounters of *Karen*, *Wanna Play? (Love in the time of Grindr)* shapes its one-to-one encounters around an interplay of face-to-face (synchronous) and online text-based (asynchronous) transactions, which come with discrete attentional obligations and requirements. The question arises as to what paying attention tells us about the relationship between the spectator and the artwork, and between the spectator and her sense of self as part of digital culture. *Wanna Play?* foregrounds the social dimension of attention as it happens online, and counter-proposes one-to-one face-to-face encounters that take place in a public space (albeit with aspects of privacy).

The theatre maker and visual artist Dries Verhoeven often positions his work in the public sphere and focuses on the relationship between the performers and their audiences, challenging and ‘unbalancing the visitor in order to evoke a shared

⁴³ Lanham, p. 18.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Mee, p. 171.

vulnerability between the viewer and the viewed work', as stated on the artist's website.⁴⁶ *Wanna Play?* is the second performance after *Life Streaming* (2010) that explicitly considers the impact of the Internet and digital media on people's lives and social behaviour.⁴⁷ In his interview with Liesbeth Groot Nibbelink, Verhoeven says 'Social media ... often promise social connectivity, yet what is the quality of these social contacts? Some of my [other] work purposefully withdraws from this and seeks to provide a space for reflection'.⁴⁸ Verhoeven has worked with one-to-one transactions in his projects before – for instance in *No Mans' Land* (2008), where individual spectators find themselves led by quiet migrant guides. As suggested by Adam Czirak, Verhoeven's work aims to 'emancipate spectators from their conventionalised roles' as viewers and focus on the actual human interactions of the moment.⁴⁹ Similarly *Wanna Play?* invites participants to attend a face-to-face exchange, which is clearly differentiated from the online social media encounters upon which the piece also depends.

Verhoeven's *Wanna play?* is a performance installation that was initially presented in October 2014 in Berlin and then in May 2015 in Utrecht, co-commissioned by HAU Hebbel am Ufer (Berlin) and SPRING Festival Utrecht. The artist spends ten days in a truck container, one side of which is glass, which is

⁴⁶ Dries Verhoeven website <<http://driesverhoeven.com/en/about/>> [accessed 1 September 2016]. Other of Verhoeven's works positioned in the public sphere include *No Man's Land* (2008), *Ceci n'est pas* (2013), and *Songs for Thomas Piketty* (2016).

⁴⁷ Liesbeth Groot Nibbelink discusses Dries Verhoeven's *No Man's Land* and *Trail Tracking* amongst other works by contemporary artists in her PhD thesis [see Liesbeth Groot Nibbelink, *Nomadic Theatre: Staging movement and Mobility in Contemporary Performance*, PhD thesis (Utrecht University, 2015), <<http://dspace.library.uu.nl/handle/1874/310682>> [accessed 1 August 2016].

⁴⁸ Liesbeth Groot Nibbelink's interview is part of the co-edited collection *Intermedial Performance and Politics in Public Sphere*, ed. by Katia Arfara, Aneta Mancewicz and Ralf Remshardt (in progress).

⁴⁹ Adam Czirak, 'The Piece Comes to Life through a Dialogue with the Spectators, not with the Performers: An interview on Participation with Dries Verhoeven', *Performance Research* 16.3 (2011), 78-83 (p. 80).

converted into a small flat with minimal decoration – a bed, a shower, a table with a few chairs, a sink and a few drawers. Through the use of various dating apps and social media, such as Grindr and Tinder,⁵⁰ Verhoeven invites his correspondents (who then if they agree become co-performers) to engage in non-sexual acts, for instance to play chess, cook and have dinner together, hold hands, or shave the artist's head. The transaction starts with casual browsing on a dating application, between strangers. Verhoeven, visible in his container with his back to random passers-by, his audience, leans over to type on his phone. At that stage, the encounter takes place mainly between two, or multiple, mobile screens and monitors – the artist's and the potential participants'. The online discussions, some of the individuals' profile information, and a negative of the profile pictures are projected on the background wall of the container. The online exchanges between the artist and the online users vary from straightforward sexual propositions to love poetry. Verhoeven tries to steer the conversation away from sex talk to more personal and intimate exchanges, which potentially lead to the participant's visit to the artist's temporary residence. A partially opaque curtain is pulled every time a visitor enters the glass box. The closed curtain, as a semi-concealing barrier between the pedestrians (who are also spectators) and the performers on display, still allows the audience to discern the interactions between two dark silhouettes.

INSERT IMAGE 2

Image 2 *Wanna Play?* Photographer: Sascha Weidner, Courtesy of Dries Verhoeven

Verhoeven made considerable changes for his Utrecht version of the project.

⁵⁰ <http://driesverhoeven.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Wanna-Play-een-reflectie_ENG_def.pdf> [accessed 1 September 2016].

In particular, the negative of the profile pictures were blurred (*röntchen* effect), none of the profile information was visible to the audience, and all visitors were informed about the performance of the encounter before they arrived at the artist's location. These changes followed a participant's complaint about the violation of his privacy when he was invited to Verhoeven's 'out of the ordinary' living arrangements in Berlin. This incident led to vehement debates online and at the site of the installation, and resulted in Verhoeven's and producing theatre Hebbel am Ufer's decision to close the performance.⁵¹

Wanna Play?'s conception lies in the artist's experiences of dating apps. Verhoeven's performance negotiates the 'attention efficiency' of social media and its impact on people's interactions. In relation to the new opportunities for dating offered by the digital domain, he observes:

I felt like a kid in a candy store. I scrolled through the photos of gay men in my area ... In no time at all, decidedly attractive men were sitting on the edge of my bed ... Grindr became part of my everyday life.⁵²

For Goldhaber online sharing and openness is motivated by the need to 'increase one's supply, not of money or material goods, but of a very different, but intrinsically

⁵¹ The artist's reflection upon the specific incident can be found here: <http://driesverhoeven.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Wanna-Play-een-reflectie_ENG_def.pdf> [accessed 1 September 2016]. For information about the controversy and the different responses to it see <<http://driesverhoeven.com/en/project/wanna-play/>> [accessed August 2016]. For a critique of Verhoeven's reflection, and further analysis of private and public negotiations in the performance, see Michael Bachmann, 'Wanna Play? Dries Verhoeven and the Limits of Non-Professional Performance' *Performance Paradigm*, Vol. 11 (2015) <<http://www.performanceparadigm.net/index.php/journal/article/view/164>> (accessed 30 April 2016)].

⁵² <<http://driesverhoeven.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/Dries-Verhoeven---WANNA-PLAYENG.pdf>> [accessed 30 August 2016].

scarce entity, namely the attention of other human beings'.⁵³

The dating apps used by Verhoeven collect geographic data of the registered users to generate automatically a contact list of people in the user's immediate vicinity. According to Simon 'the design goal of information processing systems should always be to only provide users with the information that they need to know'.⁵⁴ Indeed the apps promote a sense of efficiency and effortless navigation allowing users to access what 'they need (or want) to know'. Users just need to 'Swipe quickly through profiles' to 'view up to 100' (Grindr). Through an introduction of different add-ins Grindr and Tinder promote uncomplicated ways of meeting people 'on the go' through personalised options, which have been tailored according to their users' own criteria, filtering out undesirable and non-compatible matches. Verbal communication is not necessary, as users can 'swipe right to anonymously like someone or swipe left to pass' (Tinder), or click on 'unmatch' for specific profiles to disappear (Grindr).

Reflecting on the intrinsic supply of attention demanded and managed by social media Verhoeven wonders, 'Can we free ourselves from the existing templates and come up with new strategies for meeting with a man who is nearby? Or will I simply be blocked by the men in my vicinity?'.⁵⁵ *Wanna Play?* moves from click-throughs and swipe-throughs to online texting and then to one-to-one physical encounters. And yet Verhoeven does not reject the use of online dating and social media apps. On the contrary, the way that the performance is structured bridges face-to-face with screen-to-face encounters. If social media's 'technicity of attention' lies in 'a move from

⁵³ Goldhaber, 'Attention Shoppers'.

⁵⁴ In Taina Bucher, 'A Technicity of Attention: How Software "Makes Sense"', *Culture Machine* Vol. 13 (2012) 1-23 (p. 8) <www.culturemachine.net> [accessed 1 June 2016].

⁵⁵ Dries Verhoeven, 'Wanna Play? (Love in the Time of Grindr)' <<http://driesverhoeven.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/Dries-Verhoeven---WANNA-PLAYENG.pdf>> [accessed 30 September 2016].

“public” to “personalised” attention economies’,⁵⁶ then *Wanna Play?*’s ‘economy at play’,⁵⁷ transitions from the efficient personalisation of online dating apps to what Stefana Broadbent would call ‘joint attentional states’.⁵⁸ This attentional structure lies in the interchange of one or more streams of information between the artist and his potential participants. Indeed, correspondents, co-performers and random passers-by move ‘in and out of shared goals’ and joint ways of attending⁵⁹ depending on the level of their commitment to the specific transactions.

In her ethnographic research conducted mainly in Europe and the USA, the social scientist Stefana Broadbent considers the role of mobile technologies that can potentially sustain personal and intimate communications in public and institutionalised environments. Broadbent emphasises ‘the strong implications’ that synchronicity/asynchronicity ‘carry...for the distribution of attention’.⁶⁰ *Wanna Play?*’s synchronous/asynchronous exchanges between users, spectators and co-performers feed a ceaseless flow of attention/distraction between all the parties involved. For Broadbent, ‘Written channels are predominantly asynchronous, even when the time lag between a message and a reply is very short’.⁶¹ That is, users’ responses are not informed by a sense of ‘obligation’ or even urgency ‘to give and manifest attention’ to tasks that ask for completion.⁶² A quick swipe through a number of profiles and the brevity of the messages exchanged invites a playful and promiscuous divide in attention where asynchronicity lies.

Verhoeven relies on the social media’s asynchronicity to attract potential co-

⁵⁶ Bucher, p 12.

⁵⁷ I refer here to Foley-Sherman’s suggestion that ‘Bringing attention to attention during performance reveals *an economy at play*’ (p. 12, my emphasis).

⁵⁸ Stefana Broadbent, *Intimacy at Work: How Digital Media Bring Private Life to the Workplace* (Walnut Creek, California: Left Coast Press. 2016), p. 57.

⁵⁹ Ibid, p. 94.

⁶⁰ Broadbent, p. 36.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid, p. 37.

performers who can commit to a face-to-face synchronous encounter. This transition, from online written exchange to a face-to-face interaction, if realised, raises different expectations between the correspondents. For Broadbent, synchronous oral communications demand a specific attentional framework; that is, ‘both interlocutors must be available at the same time for the conversation and willing to dedicate the necessary amount of attention required’.⁶³ Hence, an invitation to a synchronous communication comes with a clear request and demand for the invitees to stop what they are doing and attend to the inviter.

Physical one-to-one encounters can be intrusive, uncomfortable and difficult to run away from. Heddon et al. explain that one-to-one performances can invoke ‘the notion of an “ideal audience-participant”’ heightening ‘a sense of responsibility’ for the piece of performance.⁶⁴ Reflecting on their own experiences of Adrian Howells’s *The Garden of Adrian* (and in this instance particularly Zerihan’s), the three authors discuss how at times ‘habitual responses’ – what they call ‘introjections’ – can override ‘honest behaviours’ in one-to-one encounters.⁶⁵ ‘What must or should we do?’ audiences can uncomfortably wonder. Without suggesting that these introjections are non-existent or cannot be triggered in *Wanna Play?*, the transition from carefree/less swiping through, to texting, to face-to-face encounters eases participants’ journey from asynchronous medial promiscuity into a synchronous ‘compulsive monogamy with the other’;⁶⁶ from a private to a public space. Consequently, *Wanna Play?* negotiates between the high number of connections inherent in social media interactions, which ‘frees the recipient of feeling a duty to

⁶³ Ibid, p. 36.

⁶⁴ Heddon et al, ‘Come Closer’, p. 124.

⁶⁵ Ibid, p. 125.

⁶⁶ Rachel Zerihan, ‘One to One Performance: A Study Room Guide’, Live Art Development Agency, 2009, <[www.thisisliveart.co.uk/resources/ Study_Room/ guides/Rachel_Zerihan.html](http://www.thisisliveart.co.uk/resources/Study_Room/guides/Rachel_Zerihan.html)> [accessed 28 August 2016].

respond', to a gradually reduced communication, which 'increases ... the sense of obligation'.⁶⁷

Conclusion

Digital and networked technologies are an integral part of our attention economy; not only in the ways that they can identify with the logic of the markets - in attracting attention to that which is bought and sold - but also, and perhaps most importantly, with the configuration of individuals' social and cognitive capacities. Theatre and performance works populate digital and networked platforms, presenting their audiences with opportunities to join other people's attention and/or pay attention to attention. Artists are the new economists of our time or indeed of our information-intensive environments, in the sense that they can facilitate structures to manage or even stretch their audiences' attentional faculties, while their 'tactics' allow audiences to make sense of information without *drowning* in it.

Blast Theory's *Karen* and Dries Verhoeven's *Wanna Play?* call their audience's attention mainly through one-to-one encounters, which take the shape of either face-to-face or screen-to-face exchanges. These transactions lie neither in the reinvigoration of deep attention, as Stiegler envisages, nor in rapidly shifting hyper attention. Rather Blast Theory and Verhoeven challenge their audiences' individual as well as collective sense of commitment through an interplay between the division of attention geared by networked technologies and the need to maintain moments of single focus. One-to-one performances expand on the possibilities of what it means to

⁶⁷ Broadbent, p. 37.

pay attention *differently* through synchronous and/or asynchronous encounters. These exchanges between participants and performers vary in duration and commitment, and are endemic and essential to a time whereby attention is still considered a scarce resource.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my co-editors, Andy Lavender and Maria Chatzichristodoulou for their support and generous feedback throughout this process. I am also grateful to the anonymous reviewers for their valuable comments. Furthermore, I would like to thank the Spring Festival and Utrecht University for inviting me to participate in a symposium about Dries Verhoeven's work and for giving me the opportunity to experience *Wanna Play? live*.